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5-30-2006

# Review of "Russia! Nine Hundred Years of Masterpieces and Master Collections" by James Billington, Lidia Iovleva, and Robert Rosenblum

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## Recommended Citation

Ter-Stepanian, A. (2006). Review of "Russia! nine hundred years of masterpieces and master collections" by James Billington, Lidia Iovleva, and Robert Rosenblum. *College Art Association Reviews*. doi:10.3202/caa.reviews.2006.54

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## Caa.reviews

May 30, 2006

James Billington, Lidia Iovleva, and Robert Rosenblum. *Russia! Nine Hundred Years of Masterpieces and Master Collections*. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 2005. 426 pp.; 300 color ills. Cloth

Guggenheim Museum, New York, September 16, 2005–January 11, 2006

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CrossRef DOI: [10.3202/caa.reviews.2006.54](https://doi.org/10.3202/caa.reviews.2006.54)



*Russia!* is the most comprehensive exhibition of Russian art since the end of the Cold War, and it presents an exciting journey through nine centuries of artistic development. The exhibition is the product of a collaboration between the Guggenheim Museum and three museums in Russia: the State Hermitage Museum, the State Russian Museum (both in St. Petersburg), and Moscow's State Tretyakov Gallery. Private collections, museums, and galleries in Russia, Europe, and the United States also contributed to the exhibition, which showcases over 250 artworks. Many of the pieces displayed have either rarely, or never, traveled abroad.

The exhibition starts with the display of several masterpieces of icon painting. Having adopted Orthodox Christianity in the tenth century, Russia became the artistic heir of the Byzantine cultural legacy after the fall of Constantinople. Early icon painting was heavily influenced by Byzantine art, though Russian examples displayed bolder lines, deeper colors, and more abstraction and expressiveness. A purely Russian artistic creation, the iconostasis (multi-layered icon screen) replaced Byzantine mosaics. By the sixteenth century, the Russian church developed a canonized iconostasis that stood five-tiers high. The exhibition displays more than twenty icons dating from the late twelfth

century to the late seventeenth century, including paintings by famous fifteenth-century icon painters Andrei Rubliev and Dionisii, several large-scale, late fifteenth-century icons from the *Deesis* tier located in the Cathedral of Dormition at the Kirillo-Belozersk Monastery, classical depictions of the Virgin and Child (*Our Lady of Yaroslavl* [fifteenth century] and *The Virgin of Vladimir* (1514)), and sixteenth-century silk embroideries.

The Guggenheim's first rotunda level hosts Russian art of the eighteenth century, a time when Russia began to feel the cultural influence of Western European traditions. French and Italian architects, painters, and sculptors were often invited to work in Russia. While carrying out Imperial commissions, they trained local artists according to the academic system adopted in Western Europe. Portraiture, especially official portraits of the Imperial family and the nobility, dominated the fine arts of this period. Cityscapes and history painting were also developed, though to a lesser degree. The exhibition includes portraits by the most significant Russian artists of this period: Alexei Antropov, Vladimir Borovikovsky, Dmitry Levitsky, Fedor Rokotov, and Ivan Vishnyakov. Fedor Alexeev's urban landscapes reveal his adoration for St. Petersburg.

The tradition of art collecting established by Peter the Great, and continued by Catherine the Great and Nicolas I, not only made the Russian museums important centers for art collections, but also played a crucial role in introducing Western artistic achievements to the broader Russian public. Thus, the exhibition features paintings by Anthony van Dyck, Angelo Bronzino, Peter Paul Rubens, Bartolome Esteban Murillo, Claude Lorrain, Jean-Simeon Chardin, and Antoine Watteau.

The art of the nineteenth century is displayed on the third and fourth rotunda levels and on the fourth annex level. By the first half of the century, professionally trained Russian artists, some of whom had received their training in Italy, considered themselves part of the European artistic heritage. The exhibited works display the diverse approaches developed by Russian artists: the romanticism of Orest Kiprensky's portraits, the theatricality of Karl Briullov's portraits and history paintings, the emotionalism of Pavel Fetodov's urban genre scenes, the "Russianism" of Alexei Venetsianov's idyllic peasant scenes, and the combined spirituality and naturalism of Alexander Ivanov's religious compositions. Visitors have a rare opportunity to see the epic *Ninth Wave* (1850) by accomplished marine landscape painter Ivan Aivazovsky.

Important developments in the artistic life of the country started in 1863 with the protest of fourteen Imperial Academy of Art students, who later became the core group of the Society of Traveling Art Exhibitions, known as the *Peredvizhniki* (Wanderers, or Itinerants). Though they came from diverse social backgrounds, these students formed the first Russian democratic association of artists to oppose the Imperial Academy of Arts. They strove for socially responsible art and for realistic portrayals of ordinary people's lives. The Wanderers favored genre painting encompassing a wide range of themes, such as views of ordinary people engaging in hard work (*Barge Haulers on the Volga* [1870–73] by Ilya Repin) and scenes from everyday life (*Service for the Dead* (1865) and *The Last Tavern at the City Gate* (1868) by Vasily Perov; *A Party* [1875–97] and *On the Boulevard* [1886–87] by Vladimir Makovsky). Vasily Surikov's *Capture of a Snow Fortress* (1891) belongs to the genre of large compositions featuring crowds of people of all ages from different social groups. A new approach to portraiture was also developed at this time. The traditional idealization of the model was replaced by a truthful and realistic depiction of the sitter; intellectuals, peasants, women, and children became primary subjects. Modest garments, simple poses, and neutral backgrounds replaced the pretentious accessories of the official formal portraits. In this vein, the exhibition features *Portrait of the Writer Leo Tolstoy* (1884) by Nikolai Ge, Perov's *Portrait of Fedor Dostoevsky* (1872), Repin's *Portrait of Pavel Tretyakov* (1883), and Ivan Kramskoy's famous *Unknown Woman* (1883). In landscape painting, the Wanderers—especially Isaak Levitan and Arkhip Kuindzhi—reflected the beauty of Russian nature while charging the simplest motifs with a strong patriotism and love for the land.

The close of the nineteenth century was witness to various stylistic innovations: the revival of Russian folk arts in Vasily Vasnetsov's *Knight at the Crossroads* (1878); Valentin Serov's impressionistic and light-flooded *Portrait of the Artist Konstantin Korovin* (1891), as well as Korovin's *Winter* (1894); the stylized forms and spirituality of Mikhail Nesterov's *Taking of the Veil* (1898); the romantic, lyrical themes of Viktor Borisov-Musatov's proto-symbolist *Gobelin* (1901); and the emerging Symbolism in Mikhail Vrubel's pulsating *Lilacs* (1900) and *Portrait of Nadezhda Zabela-Vrubel* (1898).

Impressionist, Post-Impressionist, Fauvist, and Cubist masterpieces from the collections of Moscow merchants Sergei Shchukin and Ivan Morozov are also on display. The exhibition features paintings by Claude Monet, Paul Cézanne, Paul Gauguin, Andre Derain, Maurice de Vlaminck, Henry Matisse, and Pablo Picasso. Shchukin's Moscow collection included some of the finest examples of Impressionist and Post-Impressionist work. Ironically, the Moscow public had a better chance of seeing modern French masterpieces at the beginning of the 1900s than the Parisian audience, thanks to Shchukin and Morozov's extraordinary aesthetic instinct and impeccable taste. It was through Shchukin's collection that soon-to-be artists of the Russian avant-garde had the opportunity to see the work of Picasso, Henry Rousseau, and other European innovators.

The rotunda's fifth level presents artworks reflecting the fascinating developments of the Russian avant-garde. The selections in this section allow viewers to familiarize themselves with key avant-garde concepts. The first distinctly avant-garde movement in Russia was Neo-Primitivism (1910–12), founded by Mikhail Larionov and Natalia Goncharova. Sources for this movement had their roots in folk art forms such as primitive *lubok* prints, signs, and peasant toys. Larionov's *Soldier* (1910–11), from his *Soldier* series, belongs to this period. In *Winter* (1912), from the *Seasons* series of the same period, Larionov adds text to the painted image, thus anticipating modernist and postmodernist relationships between text and image. In late 1912, Larionov invented *Luchizm*—Rayism or Rayonism in English—an example of which is Goncharova's *Cats* (1913). Rayonism, which according to its manifesto of 1913 was declared to be the original movement of nonrepresentational painting, was short-lived and failed to establish a steady following. *Restaurant Table. Study for Restaurant* (1915) by Nadezhda Udaltsova represents Cubo-Futurism, a truly Russian phenomenon derived from French Cubism and Italian Futurism.

The exhibition also includes two paintings from the Guggenheim Museum's permanent collection, *Sketch for Composition II* (1909–10) and *Painting with White Border* (1913), both by Vasily Kandinsky, a founder of abstract art, and one of the first artists to completely reject representational art.

At the 1915 Petrograd *0.10: The Last Futurist Exhibition*, Kazimir Malevich presented thirty-nine Suprematist paintings, including his notorious *Black Square* (1915). In his theoretical essay "From Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism," Malevich defines Suprematism as "the new painterly realism—nonobjective creation" (John Bowlt, ed., *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde: Theory and Criticism, 1902–1934*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1988, 133). Along with Constructivism, Suprematism is undoubtedly Russia's most important contribution to the international avant-garde. The *Black Square* on display at the Guggenheim exhibition is not the original 1915 painting; rather, it dates from 1930—the result of Malevich repeating at the end of his life many of his original pieces. The Malevich paintings at the exhibition encompass a range of styles: *Zaum* (beyond rational) Realist (Malevich's definition) *Morning in the Village after the Snowstorm* (1912), Suprematist *Black Square* (1930) and *Suprematism* (1915), and Metaphysical *Female Figure* (1928–29) and *Complex Premonition* (1930).

Suprematism attracted a number of artists in Russia; exhibited are Liubov Popova's *Painterly Architectonics* (1916) and Olga Rosanova's *Suprematist Non-Objective Composition (Suprematism)* of 1916. At the same *0.10: The Last Futurist Exhibition*, Vladimir Tatlin displayed his counter-reliefs, thus

laying the cornerstone for what would soon become Constructivism, represented here by Tatlin's *Counter-relief* (1916), made of wood, iron, and zinc, and Vladimir Stenberg's three-dimensional *Spiral* (1920).

This section of the exhibition also includes works by symbolists Mikhail Nesterov, Pavel Kuznetsov, Kuzma Petrov-Vodkin, as well as Marc Chagall, Ilya Mashkov, Pyotr Konchalovsky, Aristarkh Lentulov, Pavel Filonov, and Robert Falk.

The last sections of the exhibition are dedicated to the Soviet period. The stylistic diversity of the avant-garde period failed to survive beyond the early 1930s, having been replaced by the artistic doctrine of Socialist Realism. This was the only artistic method officially allowed in the Soviet Union after 1932, and was guided by the principle that art was to reflect life realistically and should have socialist content. With this vague definition Stalin's ideological machine banned a variety of avant-garde styles, movements, and artistic groups that had flourished during the 1920s. Art now had a new role to play: it was to become a propaganda tool in glorifying the image of Lenin and Stalin. This section opens with Kliment Redko's *Uprising* (1924–25), in which the image of Lenin, by this time the deceased leader of the Communist movement, is transformed into a symbol of immortality. A great number of artworks establishing the main aspects of Lenin's iconography appeared in the 1920s: Lenin as hard-working and modest thinker in *V.I. Lenin in the Smolny* (1930) and Lenin as beloved leader in *At the Coffin of the Leader* (1925), both paintings by Isaak Brodsky. Athletic, yet supremely graceful females alongside even more brawny and athletic men are typical of Alexander Deineka's paintings from the late 1920s (*The Defense of Petrograd*, 1927). *The Unforgettable Meeting* (1936–37) by Vasily Efanov, a large composition depicting the top echelon of Soviet party leaders, epitomizes the cult of Stalin. The cheerful spirit of Communist workers in Serafima Ryangina's *Higher and Higher* (1934) became an iconic reflection of the pleasures of socialist labor. A liberated new woman is the theme of *New Moscow* by Yuri Pimenov, a joyful painting filled with light and color, despite the fact that it was painted in the tragic year of 1937, during the very peak of the political purges. Deriving from the same year, a time when the life of Soviet peasants was far from joyous, the idyllic *Collective Farm Festival* by Sergei Gerasimov depicts a happy gathering of tired, but cheerful collective farmers. Deineka's forceful, energetic, and patriotically charged *Defense of Sevastopol* (1942) is one of the most notable works of the wartime period. The tranquil mood of Alexander Laktionov's *Letter from the Front* (1947) provides a strong contrast, depicting the world the soldiers had left behind: a small Russian town, a loving family, an injured friend. . . .

The character of artworks created after the death of Stalin reflects a relative artistic freedom. Renowned artist Geli Korzhev's *Raising the Banner* (1957–60), from the *Communists* triptych, and *The Traces of War* (1957–60) are very different from the optimistic canvases of the Stalinist period. Viktor Popkov's *They Built the Bratsk Hydro-Electric Power Station* (1960–61) does not glorify the triumph of socialist labor, but concentrates on the people who made that triumph possible.

The final section of the exhibition represents the art of the last three decades, characterized by a plurality of styles and approaches. Several pieces in this section point to deep social problems in Soviet reality. Oscar Rabin's *Passport* (1964) reveals the irony of the country's national policy. *Lenin Lived, Lenin Lives, Lenin Will Live* (1980–81), by Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid, originators of the Sots Art direction, is charged with multiple layers of social and cultural meaning.

Ilya Kabakov's *The Man Who Flew into Space* (1981–88) is an example of conceptual art charged with social meanings. The old pages of typed text, the folding bed, the posters on the walls, a room in a communal apartment . . . Vadim Zakharov's installation *The History of Russian Art—from the Avant-Garde to the Moscow School of Conceptual Art* (2003)—with five labeled binders, each representing an era in Russian and Soviet culture (Russian Avant-Garde, Socialist Realism, Non-Conformism, Sots Art,

and Moscow Conceptual School)—summarizes the main developments in art since the 1900s, and in a way captures the essence of the last portion of the exhibition.

The exhibition is an excellent introduction to Russian art and culture. The 426-page catalogue contains full-color reproductions of all the artwork included in the exhibition. The text is written by a group of renowned scholars and experts on Russian art and culture from both Russia and the United States, and it highlights the major movements and developments in Russian cultural history. In the introduction, James Billington discusses the early medieval period of Russian history, which includes the adoption of Greek Orthodox Christianity by Kievan princes in the tenth century and the icon-painting of the fifteenth century. Mikhail Shvydkoi, former Minister of Culture of the Russian Federation and now head of the Federal Agency for Culture and Cinematography, shares his insight into the cultural characteristics of the Russian artistic identity, which has developed at the crossroads of Eastern and Western ideologies. Essays by Mikhail Allenov, Sergei Androsov, Alexander Borovsky, Ekaterina Degot, Boris Groys, Valerie Hillings, Lidia Iovleva, Albert Kostenevich, Evgenia Petrova, Robert Rosenblum, Dmitry Sarabianov, and Gerold Vzdornov are highly informative and provide a broad overview of the key developments in each of the presented periods.

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Alexander Laktionov. *Letter from the Front*. 1947. Oil on canvas. 88 9/16 × 60 13/16 inches. The State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow. Photo: © The State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow.